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Judge Webster's successor

Much has changed since William Webster took the helm at the CIA in 1987. The possibility of direct military confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union has receded substantially.

But the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, and the general attenuation of the Cold War, don't alter America's need for reliable foreign intelligence. Indeed, in many ways, the world is a more volatile and dangerous place than it was at the height of the Cold War.

From nuclear proliferation to transnational terror to Islamic fundamentalism, the threats to international stability are many. Meanwhile, of course, the Soviet Union — despite internal economic decay, civil strife and the collapse of its East Bloc empire — remains a formidable adversary.

Judge Webster, to his credit, recognized the need to adapt the CIA to changed international circumstances. He was stalwart, however, in insisting that the agency still had a vital role to play. While this last fact may seem manifest, serious mainstream voices in Washington have actually called the CIA a Cold War relic, and have argued for its dismantlement.

Webster leaves behind him a solid record at the agency he headed for four years. A former federal judge, he was known for his integrity and was highly trusted on Capitol Hill.

True, the CIA made mistakes during his tenure. It failed to predict Saddam's

invasion of Kuwait, and — as a consequence, in all likelihood — Webster was not among the inner circle of presidential advisers directing U.S. policy during the Gulf War. But it's well to remember that Webster did anticipate the political upheaval in the East Bloc. And there were doubtless numerous CIA successes during his directorship that remain classified.

There's no reason Webster's successor shouldn't be an intelligence community veteran. Housecleaning isn't in order, and it would boost agency morale if someone from within the CIA rose to the top job.

One such candidate is deputy national security adviser Robert Gates, who's made a career of shuttling between the agency and the White House, and who was President Reagan's first choice to succeed the late William Casey in 1987. At the time, Gates' alleged involvement in the Iran-Contra affair suggested that his path to confirmation by the Senate would be difficult — and Reagan went with the unassailable Webster, then director of the FBI.

In our view, Gates would make a first-rate CIA director. Apart from long experience at the highest level of government, Gates has maintained a well-informed skepticism about liberalization and reform in the U.S.S.R.

The nation owes Judge Webster a debt of gratitude for his long years in public service. We're confident the President will choose a worthy successor — we hope it's Robert Gates.